

2004 Curt Bozif email interview of Joseph Nechvatal
about Painting



vOluptuary drOid décOlletage (2002) 66x120" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

Curt Bozif: What do you paint for? What I mean is, are you interested in personal expression?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, I am interested in personal expression. Indeed, I have a horror of mass anything – including intellectual and artistic fashions. That said, the basic premise behind my computer-robotic assisted paintings is the rhizomatic exploration of host/parasite *omnijectivity* (the metaphysical

concept stemming from the discoveries of quantum physics which teaches us that mind ~ previously considered the subjective realm ~ and matter ~ previously considered as the objective realm ~ are inextricably linked) under the influence of today's high-frequency, electronic, computerized environment. Therefore, the clean division between personal and impersonal is muddled. This non-knowledge is certainly the most erudite, the most aware, the most conscious, and the most cluttered area of our art consciousness ~ as it is also the depths from which we see ourselves as parasites into our precarious existence.

However, I think the most honest response to “What do you paint for?” is the rewards of sensual joy.

CB: Would you consider yourself a “romantic” - so to speak? Or, conversely, would you say you are more of a “classical” artist, in the sense that you are more interested in the perfection of form and craftsmanship, a technician less concerned with emotion than with structure?

JN: I am a romantic ~ in your terms ~ who works with classical tropes. That is why I have continued to work with the classical canvas in the digital age. Computational tools for transforming, combining, altering, and analyzing images are as essential to the digital artist as brushes and pigments are to a painter ~ and an understanding of them is the foundation of the craft of digital imaging.

Dig it. I like to work with the digital image in its ultimate form as immaterial coded information of pixels. I like very much the world-wide transportable dimension of the Internet, where the digital data-stream travels at the speed of light. But I also like to see a large scaled iconic image just sitting still on a

canvas, so I can silently reflect on it and mentally and emotionally move within the work in natural light ~ at my leisure ~ and with customary freedom to my bodily movements.

The essential characteristic of digital information is that it can be manipulated easily and very rapidly. It is simply a matter of substituting new digits for old. Digital images are, in fact, much more susceptible to alteration than classic photographs, drawings, paintings, or any other kinds of analog images. So the art of the digital image cannot adequately be understood as primarily a matter of capture and print.

My paintings will be featured in a forthcoming coffee-table sized book on digital art called *Art in the Digital Age* by Bruce Wands. That is the same publisher who did Christiana Paul's book *Digital Art*.

CB: Is your painting the result of some sort of a guilty self-conscience need to justify your own existence?

JN: No. Since captured, painted, and synthesized pixel values can be combined seamlessly, the digital image blurs the customary distinctions between painting and photography and between mechanical and handmade pictures. Finger movements dominate over fingerprints (think of it as playing the piano). A digital image may be part scanned photograph, part computer-synthesized shaded perspective, and part electronic 'painting' ~ all smoothly melded into an apparently coherent whole. It may be fabricated from found files, disk litter, and/or the detritus of cyberspace. Digital painting can use appropriation, transformation, reprocessing, and recombination. It exists in the age of electro-bricolage.

The ontological question you pose about my computer-robotic assisted paintings' is the wrong one. Digital painting is much less about what painting is or does or attempts, but in how it does it. One of the things that my painting does pretty well is present simultaneous imagery that lingers for contemplation. It can present mutually exclusive conditions at the same time. If computer animation can be compared to a reel of tape, then painting can be compared to random access memory. That all the information is available all the time is something that painting has going for it. Too often we concentrate on this quality as a weakness and make futile attempts to bring the element of time into an art form that is the strongest at presenting a timeless and simultaneous image that exists in a virtual space.

On the other side, computers ~ I find ~ can give more significant powers to trial and error than normal freedom of choice. Do to their speed. That speed can blow stale imagination away. This has been my experience, at least. Yet as of now a computer screen remains primarily a tool for me ~ not an end. I am not a net artist.

Recently, particularly interesting to me is the dialectic between theory and practice, and between the symbolic and the imaginary.

CB: Do you seek? - with your painting(s)?

JN: You mean, can painting combine explicitly techno-theoretical discourse with intuitive art practice? Can it show that the two are not 'opposed'?

Yes. But the key word here may be 'explicit'. Without it, it seems that any discourse with pretensions of explanation is theoretical. In this sense, almost all conceptual painting has reconciled theory and practice.

On the other hand, however, only discourses which situate themselves within a theoretical frame can claim to be explicitly theoretical. In other words, for a discourse to claim an explicitly theoretical status, it is necessary to hold a continuity through various rhetorical effects ~ such as the use of certain jargon with other discourses of recognized theory. Since there is still no such framework within to place painting, I think it is hard for any art form to play the role of explication. In other ~ very plain ~ words: painting can do theory, but it cannot call it so. Because theory, as a practice, has defined itself in explicit exclusion, not so much of intuitive practice, but of art.

Explicitly theoretical discourses such as philosophy, but also science, have no problem finding phenomena which may accommodate them with different sorts of social-political practices. On the contrary, there are many who see these hybrids not to be the exception but the rule ~ for example Bruno LaTour in his book *We Have Never Been Moderns*. In other words, in a certain sense, of course painting combines theory and practice ~ and may serve as living proof of the fact that theory and practice are not opposed ~ but so do many other social and political phenomena. Many post-Foucaultians sustain this. The point I am trying to argue for here is that the way painting combines theory and practice does not mean that it can ever transcended theory ~ but on the contrary ~ it is wholly dependent on the constructs of theory. For me, a good painting shares something diagonal with the virtual experience ~ it transpires in deep mental space and time, and, in a sense, secures that time and space for us.

CB: Are you discovering, or telling, with your paintings?

JN: Like everything important in human life, painting must be judged on the basis of first hand actual experience with it. No formula can be devised prescribing its assessment. However, for me, my paintings' general *Fin-de-Siècle*-like ornamental excess provides a metaphor for the discovery of our current complex networked computational conditions of seeing ~ and perhaps for our expansive conditions of parasite/host being. You can discover this for yourself in the rising-and-collapsing alternative visualizations ~ and unordered revelations ~ to be seen in my paintings. There are often multiple layers ~ or plateaus ~ of interpretation available to the eye. The circuits of the mind can find something congruent with my paintings' immanent structure. That is why I have been working more on the theme of hermaphroditism in my art ~ in parallel with the viral. For me the hermaphroditic sign serves as emblem of the variance that characterizes virtualism. In an age of networked incredulity ~ where hierarchies are put into crises by the digital ~ the hermaphrodite becomes the harbinger of new creative territories by constantly flickering between static boundaries.